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Power, pedagogy and the personal: Feminist ethics in facilitating a doctoral writing group.

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The paper explores questions of power arising from feminist facilitators running a doctoral writing group at a UK university. Butler's (2014) theorisation of precarity and vulnerability inspired us to re-think normative constructions of research writing and the academic identities and subjectivities this presupposed. Our doctoral writing group was imagined as a space to think collectively and reflexively about the thesis, the multi-faceted power-dynamics at work in its production, and our relations to the text as both writer and audience. This paper antagonises some of the pedagogic consequences of inviting seemingly 'personal' matters into the space of the writing space and, subsequently, the doctoral text itself. We speak back to discourses that position doctoral writing as always and only an individual, and individualising endeavour, that eschews encounters with the personal and relational. Indeed, we recognise that configurations and spaces for research writing are always 'political'.

Keywords: Academic Writing, Doctoral Students, Higher Education, Precarity, Feminist Pedagogy.

Introduction: The Place for Doctoral Writing Groups

We developed a writing group within our department at a UK research-intensive university in response to doctoral student demand for more support with thesis writing. The request for writing guidance, outside of the traditional model of supervisory apprenticeship, is reflective of both the increased pressure for timely completion and new expectations of academic publication (Kamler, 2008). It also parallels the changing nature of the doctorate itself where support for skills development has become increasingly significant, exemplified in the UK through the emergence of doctoral training centres, which both centralise scholarship funding and provide advanced training in research methods, career planning and leadership and communication skills (Boud and Lee, 2009). Yet, the writing guidance requested from the students of us was

neither skills orientated ‘nuts and bolts’ nor advice around strategising outputs. It was instead about receiving guidance connected to the process of writing in a supportive space where tensions over emerging researcher identities and subjectivities might be explored in the shaping of the production of the thesis text (Aitchison et al., 2012).

While there are no ‘neutral’ pedagogic spaces within higher education, our intention for the group was to foster a guiding (albeit responsive and therefore ever contingent) space where students could share both their difficulties and excitements about doctoral writing in a collegial context. Inspired by Butler’s (2014) work on embodying precarity and vulnerability as a group of relational and intra-connected ‘knowers’, we encouraged students to write alongside us, to re-think aspects of their theses, to imagine more supportive, creative and critical ways of capturing processes of writing in which we might all become engaged. Doctoral researchers were all necessarily wrapped within the concerns of their emerging doctoral texts and the group was committed to ‘improving’ the quality of the thesis. Unsurprisingly, nonetheless, this sparked meaning-making opportunities that extended far beyond the production of thesis text itself. Whether as facilitator or participant, we cried and laughed as we articulated our insecurities, fears, ideologies, political and paradigmatic concerns, and our desires, appreciating anew, how becoming a writer can engage such material and discursive affects simultaneously.

This paper draws on collective and reflective insights from the three facilitators of the Writing into Meaning group, especially in relation to our planning and participation within it. It builds on existing research into the identity/subjectivity work involved in all aspects of doctoral writing that draws on original empirical data (Aitchison, 2009; Aitchison et al., 2012) but asks specifically what the ‘personal’ and ‘political’ work requires of such spaces. We have become aware as self-declared

‘feminist academics’ leading the group, that this always involves ethical work: negotiating the tightrope of the pedagogic encounter with the possibilities of disclosure, vulnerabilities, the precarity of boundary-crossing and opportunities for getting ‘personal’ (Richardson, 2001) in our writerly endeavours.

As three research-active faculty members from the Education department within which many of our participants were also located, we had pre-existing relationships with most. Our own different career stages as early and mid-career academics meant that while some of us had studied as doctoral students alongside some of the participants, others of us also had several doctoral supervisees in the group. We were aware of the inevitable complex power dynamics inherent in transgressing the conventional supervision space. We were mindful of the potential for this new space to expose participants to a position of vulnerability and precariousness vis a vis the facilitators as their PhD supervisors, including perceptions of who might be the ‘real’ authority within the space. Indeed there were moments where the dynamic was complicated by discussions which shifted into supervision mode.

Inevitably, we faced ethical dilemmas that required on-going reflexive recourse to managing the ‘personal’ and questioning appropriate professional-academic responses. However, we felt that the dilemmas also offered fertile opportunities - rarely experienced in other academic spaces - for us all (facilitators and doctoral researchers alike) to enrich the quality of our academic writing through collective negotiation of insecure personal journeys, daring to take risks in uncertain writerly terrains.

Theorising the ‘Personal’, ‘The Relational’ and ‘The Political’ in Doctoral Writing Groups

The focus of our Writing into Meaning group is immersed within, and related to, several contemporary discourses. These include instrumental ideas about doctoral skills

development; appropriate pedagogies for ‘mastery’ within doctoral writing groups; and the theoretical and methodological locating of the personal, the relational and the political in research writing.

Aitchison and Lee (2006) describe the three-fold challenge doctoral students face as those of, ‘problems of knowledge production, text production and self-formation’ that become ‘complexly intertwined at the point of articulation’ (p. 268). Research writing is thus inseparable from students’ emerging identities of becoming academic and feelings of legitimacy in making knowledge claims, alongside more pragmatic issues of what and how to write. This engagement with the relationship between writing and identity often conjured personal responses from participants. From a feminist perspective we perceived an inherently political dimension to engaging with academic writing by interrogating the micro-politics obscured behind both personal and seemingly impersonal approaches to research writing.

Aitchison (2009) argues for the central importance of writing groups to support the development of a broader set of research writing competencies, that move beyond questions of language or technique. Drawing on research into academic literacies (e.g. Lillis, 2001), Aitchison describes how postgraduate language and writing is a ‘complex, context specific social and cultural practice’ (p. 906) that is best supported through social activities that are concerned with the processes of writing, as well as the writing itself. While doctoral writing group initiatives emerge in various forms in different institutions - structured or unstructured, facilitated or peer-led, in cafes or campuses - the assumption these groups share is that working together to write and to talk about writing is both generous and generative, and somehow more than the sum of their parts.

The use of doctoral writing groups has been theorised as a way to support the process of both research itself and the identity shifts involved in becoming a researcher.

For example, Wegener, Meier and Ingerslev (2016) in their reflections on taking part in a peer-facilitated doctoral writing group, noted a dynamic relationship between the production of the text and the creation of the researcher identity. Similarly, Lee and Boud (2003) in describing the value of using writing groups for faculty, emphasise paying attention to, often ignored, ‘questions of desire, identity and the emotions’ (p. 197). More broadly, writing groups have been demonstrated not only to advance specific academic literacies, but also to increase well-being, self-confidence and the ability to envisage different lives (Hinton-Smith and Seal, forthcoming). Thus in working together to write and to talk about writing, questions emerge about *who* is writing as well as *what* is being written.

Moreover, doctoral writing groups have been visited and re-considered through drawing on critical and feminist pedagogies, as a way to ‘to question and transform existing modes, frameworks, and institutions of knowledge production’ (Pereira, 2012, p. 284). For example, Grant (2006), in accounting for the pleasure of writing retreats, describes the importance of collective, supportive and public writing practices as a way to transgress and interrupt the dominant academic culture of writing in isolation. Maher et al. (2008) theorise this process as a discursive social practice. A motivation for Writing into Meaning was to challenge dominant neoliberal discourses of writing as individual and individualising, taking place in silent cloisters of the academy, to be competitively ranked and metricised. Instead, drawing on Grant and Knowles (2010), we hoped to create more imaginative, pleasurable and productive spaces to write within. However, as Aitchison (2009) has observed there is little empirical data on the experiences of teaching and participating in such doctoral writing groups that would attend to both their effectiveness and the pedagogical and political relations they might presume and engender.

The notion that attention to different approaches to doctoral thesis generation might produce textual variety, links with epistemological questions concerning the forms of writing that hold credence within high-level research scholarship.. The poststructural literary turn has opened opportunities for more experimental forms of writing through moving away from quasi-scientific approaches to text production, shifting research writing away from the realist towards the rhetorical (Beach, 2001). Thus Burke (2008) describes her academic writing as a battle against a ‘lifelong learning experience shaped by powerful discourses of objectivity, rationality and keeping out the personal voice’ by questioning and ‘pushing the boundaries of who can write and how’ (p.199). Similarly, our group became a space for some queering of taken-for-granted norms of research writing.

The place for ‘the personal’ is taken up powerfully by Richardson (2010) where she asserts that ‘people who write are always writing about their lives’ (p. 34). In her contestation of the scientific binary of the ‘head’ and ‘the heart’, Richardson (2001) suggests that such a bifurcation does not ‘map onto actual practices [of writing] through production of knowledge, or knowledge about how knowledge is produced’ (p.34). In this poststructural take, she invites consideration of an inversion of the ‘personal’ as political’ such that the public generation of knowledge through writing, ‘as a method of discovery’ (p.35), is a politics that is always intensely personal, regardless of whether it is claimed by the writer or not. Yet possibilities for ‘liberatory feelings’ of ‘getting personal’ within the doctoral text and its subsequent iterations are never value-free. There are important risks, which require ethical and political responsibility from us as teachers encouraging students into particular reflexive writerly spaces where the political as personal may be taken as read.

As well as questioning forms of writing that can and ought to be produced, research into postgraduate academic writing has challenged some of the assumed tidiness and mutual exclusivity of research processes. For example, Badley (2009) critiques the notion of 'writing up' as a compartmentalised stage, with its connotations of neatness and passive assembly. Instead, he proposes a more dynamic process of 'constructing, deconstructing and reconstructing knowledge, connecting, disconnecting and reconnecting concepts, describing and redescribing' (p. 209). Similarly, Flower and Hayes (1981) employ a musical analogy to suggest that 'writing is best understood as a set of distinctive thinking processes which writers orchestrate or organise during the act of composing' (p.366). Thus, what constitutes writing emerges through creative, simultaneous processes of thinking/writing/re-writing. These messy, overlapping stages offer fertile sites for growth, and mean, we cannot assume that academic writing commences after the thinking, and the all-important planning, has been completed.

Writing can be theorised as being part of the methodological journey of coming to know (Dunne, Pryor and Yates, 2005). The notion of writing *as* meaning making inspired the naming of our group and pedagogic approach of thinking, understanding and theorising writing together. Academic writing becomes recognised as not merely a set of skills demonstrating achievements, to be formally assessed and 'ticked off', but a 'vehicle for learning' (Aitchison, 2009, p.907) or as Richardson (2001) characterises, a process in which we 'reword the world' (p.35). Thus writing is not an add-on to research that simply happens instrumentally if we have the right recipe and materials; but rather a complex, contextual and highly personal process of construction, re/de-construction and nurture. As Webb (2014) has suggested, '[writing] requires an appreciation of the vagaries of temporality - as process, as moment, as 'backwardness' and 'forwardness' and as reflection' (p.61). Such considerations of academic writing as

the ‘doing’ of contingent learning not only require greater attention to the teaching of writing; they also imply the acknowledgement of a far more intimate relationship between academic writing, the writer and the temporality and spatial infrastructures (Butler, 2014) within which these come together.

Barnacle and Dall’Alba (2014) also take us into a territory concerning the ‘precariousness’ of working against the political construction of doctoral writing as nothing other than the placing of the academic writer at arms length and requiring that words pour forth from a cognitive space onto the page as ‘plentiful, useful and productive’ (Barnacle, 2005). They suggest that shifting into an alternative terrain requires ‘integrating ways of knowing, acting, and being’ (p.1145) that are both anxiety inducing and ‘fraught’ (p.1146). Furthermore, they posit that such writerly embodiments can provoke personal sensations of fragility and instability. Nonetheless, they urge us to embrace the ephemeral ‘provisionality’ that such precariousness demands (p.1147) to work against conventional notions of writing as ‘achieving command and control’ (p.1141). Indeed, they tentatively imply that only ever addressing the dominant discourse of ‘mastery’ over doctoral writing in terms of deploying a set of well-honed pre-prescribed skills in writing workshops, runs the risk of unwittingly only ever conceiving of ‘mastery’ as stable and certain.

Butler writes of ‘the status of embodiment and vulnerability’, not within a context of the ‘safe’ confines of academic writing but in relation to what is at stake within ‘political mobilizations’ (p.2) in public infrastructural spaces where freedoms are fought over. We feel that Butler’s arguments pertaining to precarity, vulnerability and political spaces of personal and relational coming together can be usefully set to work within this paper. If we conceive of doctoral writing as performative; that is, preceding us and acting upon us through norms with certain possibilities and conditions, then, we

can recognise the political effects of ‘institutional structures and social worlds’ that might constrain/enable us to write (Butler, 2014, p.8). We suggest that Butler's performative and relational assertion of the power of spaces of precarity and vulnerability can challenge a dominant masculinist ontology of mastery as only ever that of certainty and control. This opens up political spaces to write otherwise; supporting the assertion of a feminist ethic that can bear the personal and the political. This means countering the exclusions of writerly registers, and instead, fostering contingency, tentativeness and uncertainty, to claim a form of political relational mastery in doctoral writing that can bear the weight of ontological vulnerability. This became, for the three of us, an ‘offer’ that we felt we could make in relation to the possibilities of the Writing into Meaning group for those who so wished to take up the challenge.

The Pedagogy of Writing into Meaning

The Writing into Meaning group ran from September to December 2016. It was principally aimed at researchers in the latter stages of their doctoral journeys, but it attracted postgraduates at different stages of their writing including those writing for publication. The group was predominantly made up of women, of varying ages and from different geographic and cultural backgrounds. They represented disciplines including Education, Social Work, Psychology, Sociology, English Literature and Global Studies. Whilst we did not collate demographic data, the group reflected many of the characteristics of students studying in our department and related disciplines. A total of 30 students accessed the group, with a core of 12-15 regular attendees. Fortnightly facilitated workshops were interspersed with peer-led workshops. However, many

more interested parties also accessed the collaboratively-produced blog,¹ fostering inclusivity for those not able to attend every session. An onus on the importance of the student voice within the physical and online pedagogical space had been central to our relational perspectives as feminist educators, and allowed participants to be ‘not only the actor, but also the author’ of their writing encounters (MacIntyre, 1981, p. 198).

As facilitators, we described the group as providing:

- Technological/instrumental effects (or techniques for ‘getting it written’)
- Professional/pedagogic effects (or, conceptualising how meaning is made through writing, drawing on poststructural theorisations)
- Personal effects (or, creating a community of writers)

We did not claim an intention to teach ‘academic writing’ in a way which replicated existing support provided by supervisors, doctoral training sessions and study guides.

Instead, we conceived of writing as fundamentally concerned with process.

Consequently, writing activities included: writing tasks aimed at different imagined audiences, reading and commenting on each others’ scripts and on-going opportunities for shared, rich, reflective discussion about the doing of writing, both in the moment and in other spaces.

The dominant underpinning approach to writing that threaded through the group was that of the idea of free-writing (Elbow, 1989; Hunt, 2013), with which we began each session. Regular free-writing was aimed at enabling the temporary switching off of imagined, constraining, critical academic audience voices in order engage in a process of filling the page with words. This would vary in length from anything between 10 and 15 minutes, broken up in sections throughout the two-hour session, to which we returned frequently to develop and refine. Honing ‘free-writing’ was something that was

¹ <http://writingintomeaning.wordpress.com>

built upon cumulatively each time the group met. Everyone wrote - whether as facilitator or doctoral researcher - and subsequent activities of sociality and sharing arose from this initial writing stimulus. Outputs from the writing group, along with associated reading materials were refined and scrutinised further within the peer-facilitated workshops. This writing often became the basis of doctoral researchers' contributions to the online blog, designed to build a cumulative account of the evolving experience of writing separately but together.

We were aware that this unstructured, often personal and collaborative pedagogical style might have felt as though it were the antithesis of 'academic'. Yet we were motivated by our commitment to a feminist ethic, inspired by Butler (2014), that rigid divisions, between different kinds of writing – academic, creative, critical, and personal - can be normalised presumptions. We wanted to encourage thinking that the separation of writing genres can be counterproductive to writing that engages discursive constructions of mind-body. We imagined the group as a generative space for repositioning the significance of the personal, the relational and the political, allowing an exploration of the gap between self and reflexivity, what Derrida has termed 'the unbridgeable gap or *différance* between ourselves and our words' (Derrida, 1976, trans. G. Spivak). Alongside the affects of the inter-relational, articulated by many as supportive and nurturing, we also found a blossoming of powerful relational dialogics between selves and writing, which we anticipated might contribute valuably to emerging and on-going academic writing beyond the confines of the group. Indeed, many participants reported that engaging in the group's pedagogies and underlying methodological approaches did inform, enrich, and 'shift' their writing, with some excerpts of 'freer' writing undertaken as part of the group, making their way, verbatim, into doctoral texts.

Some data that we draw out below are the fruits of the contribution of all who participated in this collective writing group journey. This includes insights from the evaluation feedback that we asked participants produce; contributions from the blog; as well as our own fieldnotes and participatory writing. Selected and distilled here for the effervescence of moments that ‘glow’ (MacLure, 2013, p. 228), these data capture, question and provoke our collective desires to re-think the feminist im/possibilities of the group, both throughout its inception and duration. It denotes our particular attentiveness to teaching as a pedagogical, methodological and political interaction and enquiry.

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Whilst we came to position ourselves as committed to embodying vulnerability (Butler, 2014) in order to challenge dominant discourses of ‘mastering’ academic writing (as discussed above), we appreciated that this posed the challenge of particular socio-affective consequences which required further unpacking. These concerned the impossibilities/plausibilities of the binaries of teaching/learning and teacher/student. We recognised that, depending upon our power positionings within the group, our enactments of vulnerability would map themselves differently. This meant that any assumptions about what it would mean to ‘get personal’ would be differentially experienced and risked by all members of the group. As we will see below, we came to consider more overtly whether the Writing into Meaning group, could be claimed as a ‘feminist’ writing group: what might such a naming assume, produce and possibly deny? Below we ‘think with’ (Jackson and Mazzei, 2012) a range of theoretical

resources to consider ideas of ‘border crossing’, ‘getting personal’ and a ‘feminist ethic’ drawing upon data from the group.

Getting Personal: Border Crossings to Awkward Territories?

As feminist academics it would have felt disingenuous to attempt to maintain a model of authoritative ‘teacher’ detachment whilst inviting our students to step into a space of precariousness through candid free-writing. Hence in line with a feminist ethic of striving to maximise democratic inclusion, we participated alongside and with the group. This effort to reduce the distance between ‘us’ and ‘them’ as a way of negotiating the multiply-layered power relations of intersectional identity, afforded us the opportunity to pursue our own learning in line with Kvale’s metaphorical ‘traveller’, wandering with ‘participants in the process of arriving at insight’ (1996, p.4).

Yet our approach of participating in writing ‘in the moment’, left us feeling exposed. Stripped of the familiar opportunity to censor our responses to present a measured performance as the authoritative consummate professional (Turner and Webb, 2012), we found ourselves, similarly placed to student workshop participants, as writing about personal experiences that evoked emotional responses that we had not necessarily foreseen. Clearly, we had anticipated ‘thinking on our feet’. However, this had not prepared us for just how much we might disclose (or not) about ourselves in order to uphold the integrity of a pedagogical process which demanded the challenging of ontologies of distance and reserve between teacher and student. This dilemma spoke to our collective concern of ‘how to deal with our positions as both knowing subjects and objects of knowledge, insofar as this enables us to access shared experiences’ (Scott et al. 2012, p.715).

Our approach denied us the traditional privileged positioning as academics of a: ‘relatively strong and powerful, even paternalistic position... as someone who has no

dramaturgical qualms about themselves and whose emotional self remains a ‘black box’ of undisputed integrity’ (Atkinson et al., 2003, p. 426). Instead, sharing in the willingness to spontaneously improvise free-writing and dialogic reflection ‘on demand’, cost us the teacher’s privilege of pedagogic slickness. We constantly reflected upon, and questioned, our corporeal management and comportment within each session, including for example around the concern of having disclosed ‘too much’ (Scott et al., 2012). Nevertheless this willingness to acknowledge the situated-ethics of our pedagogic practice gave us the opportunity and impetus to explore ‘beneath the surface’ (Ruch, 2014, p. 525) of our interactions within the writing group and to ‘hold on to’ the uncomfortableness that this often provoked as an ontological precarity of such work.

Co-teaching, participating in, and reflecting on the free-writing activities, evoked strong emotional responses for us all at different points in the life course of the group. While negotiating the spontaneous improvisation of participating in the writing workshops engendered some painful challenges to our assumed comfort zones as academics, the process, also felt simultaneously and paradoxically freeing: ‘empowering [us] to relieve ourselves of the burden of professional and competent self-presentation’ (Scott et al. 2012, p.731). This prompted conversations between us on the ethics of ‘boundary-crossings’ as supervisors/colleagues sharing so much of ourselves together and with our students in ways that transgressed some tacit and yet powerful onto-epistemic assumptions of hierarchies of academic relationships.

Following on from weekly sessions, we discussed how some deviation from our assumed academic roles might present a challenge to our occupational identity, threatening boundaries of carefully constructed, managed and performed professionalisms where we learn, over time, not to mention aspects of our own

experiences. We were acutely aware that such boundary crossing could represent, as Guillemin and Gillam (2004) suggest:

Ethically important moments, where the approach taken or the decision made has important ethical ramifications, but where the researcher does not necessarily feel himself or herself to be on the horns of a dilemma. (p. 265)

In one workshop session, we drew on Richardson's (2001) article 'Getting personal: Writing Stories' to explore boundaries between self and writing, introducing the notion of telling certain stories of ourselves as researchers. The group were invited to think more about our own stories, reflecting especially upon where (if at all) we locate ourselves as embodied subjects within our own academic writing. We collectively antagonised how narratives may already be 'storied' within our heads or emerge, rather, through the process of writing. Our purpose as teachers in this context was to enable participants to consider just how different relationships can cohere between an amalgam of researcher identity/subjectivity, theory and methodology, and the process of writing. This was in order to provoke explorations of opportunities for resisting potentially restrictive paradigmatic boundaries within the final thesis text. Miller (1997) highlights the importance of our own personal stories in helping us to locate ourselves as 'all theorists' (p. 4) through developing our own histories and relations to the meanings we produce in text. We explored opportunities and personal experiences of 'paradigm shift', including the consideration of what might be at stake in a move away from the preferred paradigmatic shibboleths of one's supervisor. Did telling [new or different] stories in the workshop space give us new insights into the boundaries, contexts or paradigms in which we habitually tended to operate as writers? One of the authors, in the first year of both a full time academic post and motherhood, wrote the following as part of a free-writing exercise and blog post:

Cold, slippery. Oh shit I'm going to slip over. Will I slip over or slip up? Slipping, squeaking, knocking together. Writing knocking up against life/work – when is there space for writing? Writing about what? Just bloody write about the pebble. A pebble is perfectly soft but perfectly imperfect. Babies cheeks, kissable but also lumpy, misshapen, unique. New beginnings. This is me. Slipping between academic/mum/student/daughter/friend/wife – who the fuck am I anyway? Slipping can be wild, fun, uncertain, terrifying. Where will I slip next? What will I write next? A book? Who'd want to read that?

The value of acknowledging such precariousness meant that as academic writers, we were demonstrating how we 'operate under conditions of uncertainty and indeterminacy' yet nevertheless 'can still write...critically and meaningfully with this in mind' (Beach, 2001, p.314). Certainly, sharing such personal writing evoked concerns about being taken seriously within the group. And yet, to our delight, one student and teaching colleague described particularly how she experienced this exercise as helpfully 'pushing aside power struggles' that so often reside within teacher-student relationships. Momentarily then, we experienced points of undiluted pleasure beyond existential fragility and precariousness.

The Power to Get Personal: Who's Included/Excluded?

As the series of writing workshops progressed, we came to appreciate that the 'emotional work' (Lee and Boud, 2003) required of us, and of the participants, was freighted with our own tacit assumptions of an ethic of care towards one another and the group and the seeking of 'rapport', which is never entirely straightforward or transparent, despite the way in which it is often characterised as such (Hey, 2001).. A series of questions occurred to us as we critically appraised our on-going delivery of each session and planned for the next: What were our on-going responsibilities to our students in unwittingly generating something of a 'therapeutic space' for them? What

were the performative demands required of students in such a space? And who and what might be excluded in this ‘sharing’ pedagogic space we had assumed? Theorising similar emotionally charged higher education pedagogic work, Macfarlane (2014) argues that the demands of this are rarely problematised, obscuring matters of inequality and power within such spaces. Indeed, for the three of us, speaking about our own writing openly and self-critically, involved crafting a vision of who we were and how we were to publicly speak about ourselves. Speaking thus, involved aspects of ‘self-revelation’ at one and the same time as we policed ourselves with regard to the governing technologies of the ‘rules of the academic game’. We wanted to remain aware of how our championing of free-writing at the start of every session could challenge some doctoral writers a step ‘too far’ in terms the managing of their own responsiveness to the precarity and vulnerabilities of the tasks with which we presented them.

Finlay suggests that ‘the self...should be exploited only while it remains purposeful to do so’, counselling that ultimately, reflexivity should be ‘neither an opportunity to wallow in subjectivity nor [a] permission to engage in legitimised emoting’ (2002, p.215). We were committed to the political value of personal exposition. This meant acknowledging how marginalisation can often mask the invisibility of some within higher education pedagogic spaces, excluding ‘difficult’ voices. Through ‘digging deep’ into our own histories, where we often fear to go in our thoughts, let alone within the unequivocal evidence of words on a page, we wanted to provide all group participants with opportunities to delve into realms of reflexivity, to ‘confront the beast...in the dark beyond’ (Macmillan, 1996; in Finlay, 2002, p. 227). At no point, however, did we ask participants to write or talk about anything that they did not wish to share. Nevertheless, experiences did emerge in writing that were of a highly

personal a nature. It was crucial for us, in response, to accept and work with what emerged, whilst foregrounding an, albeit contested and contextual, politics and pedagogy of care (Avis and Bathmaker, 2004).

Indeed, many of the doctoral researchers in the group described how they experienced free-writing as rewarding and liberating, enabling them to explore how they wished to place their personal script within the framing of their thesis. Many researchers touched on the sense they had of the explorations of the personal as ‘unblocking’ what they wanted to convey, building their confidence, and legitimising the presence of their own voice in their texts in ways with which they had hitherto struggled. For us, as three busy academics, often working alone, and in isolation for much of our time, we experienced the opportunities afforded by the group, to write alongside one another, to listen and to discuss elements of how we each scripted ourselves into the texts we produce, as something of our ‘regular fix’. In particular, one of us found that the experience enabled a revisiting of an aspect of her personal researcher story:

I moved to a new department, I began to come across different approaches to academic writing that validated the personal more. This included among my PhD students. One particular student, came to me already well into her PhD, with an already developed, very particular writing style. When I read what there was of the work, I found the tone to be angry, emotive, personal, confessional; everything that I had been meticulously taught in my sociology training, had no place in good, clean, quasi-scientific (as opposed to grubby) writing. And so in supervision, I suggested to the student that we really needed to revisit this writing style. Thank goodness, the student confidently put me in my place by explaining that ‘no. It’s fine. People write like that. It’s meant to be like that.’ We embarked on a dialogue whereby I kept pressing her anxiously for emergent ‘patterns in the data’, while she patiently insisted that she wished the individual stories of these marginalised individuals to be allowed space to come forward in their own words, as unique experiences. Luckily, the student had sufficient confidence, and I a sufficiently

persuadable supervisory style, that the story had a happy ending. She continued her PhD with the voice(s) she had chosen.

The description above, accords with our sensibility of developing a writing space with attendant practices that would not exclude and that would indeed allow for the possibilities of thinking and writing otherwise. It captures how writing is always deeply caught up within 'wider power relations' that signify 'the concept of writing as a social practice' (Burke, 2008, p. 200), begging the question of just who can become a legitimate knower (Danvers, forthcoming) in the field of the production of the all important academic doctoral thesis text.

Getting Personal as a Feminist Ethic: What does this presume?

When we described the work we had been doing as part of the writing group, a former colleague within our department, asked us: 'is it a feminist group?' The posing of this question had surprised us, and possibly so because it seemed to demand that we declare a politics for the group 'publicly' in a way that made us feel a little uneasy. We mused: would such an overt naming presume - or indeed - curtail what might be desirable or even possible within the group? After all, we were happy to subscribe to the label of 'feminist academic' ourselves elsewhere in the academy, but in our efforts to 'expand' the space of doctoral writing, we were squeamish about a fixing of a pre-prescribed and particular valuing, that might deter some writers from joining. We had been wary of exclusivity and of setting up the group as an effete and self-congratulatory space unable to bear the noise of dissonant or contradictory textual voices. Nonetheless, we had not imagined the group as beyond some 'cultural production' (Usher, 2000, p.166) that could be simply and transparently swept to one side and proffered as 'beyond' naming.

The question prompted us to reflect on the values and commitments that we felt underpinned the group. Indeed, we realised that our pedagogic approaches to it reflected

our tacit feminist commitments of acknowledging and addressing power differentials characterising traditionally ‘malestream’ approaches to actively seek to build empathy, compassion and mutual disclosure (e.g. Ramazanoglu and Holland, 1999). And the question posed to us, was also most certainly connected to our championing of an unsettling of the seemingly obvious ‘authorial status of the doctoral writer’ (Barnacle and Dall’Alba, 2014, p.1140), where mastery of the writing process signifies nothing more than an ‘instrumental framing of processes and activities’ (p.1142).

Nonetheless, in so far as it might be captured as a ‘feminist writing group’ we have held to the encouragement of an ‘awkward’ poststructural feminist ontology of precariousness and vulnerability that Butler (2014) invites in her generous and urgent recent written expositions. For us, this most certainly means embracing the academic writing process as always an uncertain production. This is very different from ‘the idea of the political subject that establishes its agency by vanquishing its vulnerability (p.15). Butler reminds us that it is through the claiming of the personal within the relational space of a group such as this that meanings get made and remade. To this end, our experiences of facilitating the Writing into Meaning group corroborated that it may:

Be possible, perhaps, to capture as much – maybe more of what it is that can be known, were we to set its assured fixity to one side, and open ourselves up to the possibilities of observing more psychically, more ethnographically, and more socially (Webb, 2014, p. 51).

This outward-facing, relational dimension to thinking and writing emerged to be as significant within the group as the internalising, psychic dimension of it. One student wrote in the blog about how her participation had enabled her to map previously unexplored relationships between her academic writing and her engagement with social activism, in ways that had hitherto escaped her which had felt ‘irrelevant’ in the rarefied space of the doctoral thesis. Comments such as this, affirm the potential of

higher educational spaces for coming together for some common social good. It further attests to the value of the ‘ethical purpose’ of academic writing (Bowstead, 2011) . This is captured within the angst-ridden blog post, reproduced below, of one doctoral researcher as she grappled with personal, relational and political entanglements with not only the writing process, but the doctoral project itself:

I wanted to make the world a ‘better place’ yet have come to deeply question what it means to have pure impact or influence. How can I decolonise my writing, so that it does not cast a net over my field site, capturing the people who shared their stories with me, as mere morsels of meat which I process and package to be devoured as though canned tuna fish, wedged within the sandwiches to be served at some or other academic meet and greet?

A Butlerian response ought to be clear and yet contingent, upholding a feminist ethic of a commitment to the possibilities of writing as a space to make both ‘life and action possible’ (Butler, 2014, p.5).

Conclusions: Feminist ethics in facilitating a doctoral writing group.

Our experience of running the Writing into Meaning group was that the pedagogical approach we took of utilising free-writing, validating the personal, and locating ourselves clearly within the writing process, had had the effect of generating significant experiences for all participants. We posture that these were far from gratuitous or, self-indulgent. Rather, our pedagogic encounters within the group, locate the central role that identifying the personal and finding our own voice in our own work, contributes to academic writing. The collective experience of the group opened the door to vulnerability and professional precariousness which, we assert, has an important place in the research process. When two of us worked together for a peer writing feedback exercise in the group, one of us reflected afterwards that:

Although the writing I shared with my partner was of a qualitatively different character, we both discovered in our mutual feedback to one another, that the slices of writing that resonated most effectively were those where we could ‘hear’ the voice of the writer most clearly. Glancing at a script shared and reviewed as part of this process, has scribbled in a margin (as part of the peer reviewer’s annotation), ‘here, I can now hear you again’.

The self-retrospection and introspection, which Beach suggests constitutes our collective ‘motives as a writer’(2001, p.325), resonated with our experience of our Writing Into Meaning group where we were mindful, nonetheless, that ‘the challenge is not to confuse precarious with poor’ (Barnacle and Dall’Alba, 2014, p.1147) in ‘letting anything go’.

Our pedagogic approach to the doctoral researchers meant engaging with them in writing, and participating in the journey alongside them. This collapsed neat containments of tutor-student roles and breaching some boundaries of this assumed power-relation. The experiences and the disclosures we shared through our writing and discussions had the effect of binding us, as teachers and participants, into ‘a contract of mutual candour and humanity’ (Crewe et al. 2014, p.14). We all felt there to be benefits to students in our sharing difficulties we have encountered and overcome in negotiating our academic writing and wider selves. In reflecting on the Writing Into Meaning group, one of the authors suggested that::

This group is not simply a space to do ‘feelings’. Instead such emotion work is always theorised and politicised by showing that academic identities are neither fixed nor straightforward and that engaging with writing is an embodied, and deeply affective process. And, moreover, in modelling our own performances as educators around being generous, imperfect and open we hope to suggest a model to think otherwise about becoming academic. Therefore sharing is caring, and maintains a feminist ethic, if we use the space of our group as a disruption to writing practices that continue to reproduce exclusions.

While the ‘power’ to do the personal in pedagogical spaces is differentially and politically located, being mindful of this can work to chip away at boundaries of objectivity, completeness, and individuality that can govern doctoral researcher writing practices. Hence we conjecture that rather than being a weakness, the vulnerability and precarity revealed by such an approach to writing informs a productive opportunity to the potential of such a space.

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